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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a community college English instructor reviews the pertinent literature and presents his own thoughts on the roles of literature, grammar, linguistics, and semantics in teaching freshman composition and on the most common methodologies used. He also offers some general conclusions regarding composition as a subject in the community/junior college. A bibliography is appended. (DC)

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SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING FRESHMAN ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A SHORT REVIEW

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Composition: Definition and Philosophies:

If the aim of higher education, and the community/junior college as a special adjunct of it, is the "general education" of the constituency it serves, then composition is a vital and inextricable part of the overall scheme of it. As Bob Knott has suggested (1975), a liberal education is one in which the emphasis is placed on the acquisition of a broad variety of interrelated skills, by which an individual might learn to better cope with his environment as a whole, rather than an education consisting of discrete competencies--individual bits of knowledge and isolated skills. It may not necessarily be a defensible posture to insist that all students in a community/junior college should (or should not) take English composition, but where it is required for a degree or certification, where it is required as a part of a liberal or general education curriculum, or [illegible]e it is taken as one part of an English elective in a broader program, composition certainly ought to be considered as a vital part of the entire instructional spectrum. John Scally (1976) has done some work suggesting that the humanities, including English, should be made an integral part of the vocational curriculum by "trans-valuing," or translating humanistic values into the language of the career-oriented person. It is, I suppose, arguable (Rundle, 1975) that a really effective humanities curriculum would be more suited to older adults than freshmen of the 18-20 group, by virtue of their greater experience and years.

English composition is a subject of various definitions, and certainly lends itself to a broad range of individual perceptions on

the parts of both faculty, administration, and students (Weingarten, 1965: 29). Furthermore, beyond the difficulty of its definability, different researchers vary in their opinions as to what sort of philosophical stance ought to be taken toward it, or how exactly it ought to be perceived in relation to other parts of the liberal arts curriculum. Glen Matott identifies two teaching philosophies in composition: the funnel (students are recepticles of teacher's wisdom), and the pump (students are the sources of their own creative expressions) (Matott, 1976). Cowley and Redman (1975) offer a good rationale for teaching composition as a part of a liberal arts/general education, even technical-vocational/occupational, curriculum. In fact, theirs is as good a general purpose defense of English composition in the post-secondary schools as any I've read:

> . . . writing and thought are inextricably linked. This philosophical stance, then, denies lazy writers the refuge of their recurrent refrain: 'I know what I mean, I just can't put it into words.' If an idea can't be written out, it probably is too fuzzy to have much meaning and requires a closer look.//The writer who wishes to achieve mastery of expression feels strongly enough about his invention that he wishes to put it down in order to communicate it to others. He cares enough about his readers that he will take pains to avoid ambiguity and even to spell correctly and to frame his sentences so that readers must do as little work as possible to get his message. Where invention is solitary, expression is social--it involves other people. Public writing must meet the standards of social communication before it can serve as a channel of communication for others. Private writing, on the other hand, need not meet these requirements for social communication, but then private writing should not be submitted for publication. Private writing serves for therapy or release or fulfills other personal needs. Private writing deserves some classroom time. The teacher should teach the value and place of this foundational activity; but novice writers must eventually move from self exploration into communication with others. (pp. 279-280)

If it is a safe assumption that students have thoughts they wish to express, and assuming the format of a liberal-arts type curriculum of some sort, then composition deserves focused attention as a problem in teaching communication. Bleich's essay (1975) deals with the difficulties of judging students' essays on the basis of their tacit justification as exercises meant to meet writing assignments. Audience in student themes, then, is clearly of importance in treating the whole subject of English composition. In the community/junior college, who is the implicit audience of an automotive mechanics student's theme on Shakespeare?

For my purposes, English composition, as a freshman-sophomore level course, involves teaching writing and thinking as interlocking disciplines of public communication. To publish need not necessarily mean to have printed in mass media publications, but it does have the implication of writing for an audience larger than merely the teacher. Therefore, English language composition is a writing course, essentially, utilizing the skills of critical reading, thinking, and thoughful writing (see Altick, pp. xi-xxi), and as a part of the total language and humanities curriculum of the post secondary junior college, it is a course essentially designed to teach students the arts and techniques of public communication. As Weingarten and Kroeger point out, English "is required for graduation by the majority of the two-year colleges reporting," so the first responsibility of the prospective two-year college English instructor is to find out some of what is happening in that domain regarding his discipline (Weingarten and Kroeger, p. 18).

The outline of this paper will be as follows: first, I will discuss the role of literature in teaching freshman composition, second, the role of grammar, linguistics, and semantics, third, some of the most common methodologies of teaching composition, and fourth, I will offer some general conclusions regarding composition as a subject in the community/junior college.

The Role of Literature in Teaching Freshman English Composition:

Imaginative literature, as Weingarten and Kroeger point out, is used as a part of the total reading material in freshman composition about 62% of the time (187 schools responding) for first semester course, and about 77% of the time for second semester courses. This seems to me a fairly large percentage for composition courses (not literature courses), but remember those percentages reflect the proportion of classes using some imaginative literature in their courses. Up to 28% of second semester courses utilize a lot of imaginative literature in their courses. Taken the other way around, about 38% of first semester courses use no literature ever, or about 23% of second semester courses. Poetry, fiction, and imaginative essays seem to be heavily relied on as teaching aids in community/junior college freshman composition (Weingarten and Kroeger, p. 33).

Jack Estes (1973) and Marjorie Smelstor (1976) both discuss the relevancy of popular culture in the composition classroom. Smelstor defines popular culture as " 'all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally, though not necessarily, disseminated through the mass media' " (p. 42). Popular culture--comic books, newspaper funnies, newspapers, popular novels (mysteries, fantasy, romances), magazines--would seem especially appropriate to me in teaching composition in the relatively non-elitist atmosphere of the community/junior college. It is quickly assimilated, easily understood, and for most of the students, could often well serve as a writing model for themes, journals and so on. This is not to imply

a lower overall quality of teaching (or learning) in the community junior college, but clearly many students could benefit from the use of these materials as subject matter in learning composition. University English professors sneer at newspaper writing and Reader's Digest type reportage, but it would fit right in to a beginning composition classroom.

H. Eric Branscomb uses a version of George Orwell's famous essay "Marrakech" which he re-wrote to sound like a freshman's typical first-person narrative, and by so doing, points up some of the common weaknesses they display in their writing. Ronald L. and Barbara B. Cramer have some interesting views on "Writing by Imitating Language Models" (1975). Their experiments were with young students, but I can see the use of writing models in college composition as well. I once constructed a lesson plan calling for a careful re-writing, in the students' own words, of two passages from two of Shakespeare's tragedies (MacBeth and Othello), so as to retain the imagery and essential meaning of the original (both of which were exhaustively discussed beforehand), but reflected the students' own thought and modes of expression.

It seems to be that literature is the best of all available resources for teaching composition. In view of the apparent decline of writing ability among students, the best examples which are available might serve as ready resources for inspiration and modeling. Perhaps students would have more of a negative reaction to writing models (and remember, there are hundreds of ways imaginative literature can be used as a resource in a writing class) than a positive reaction--"I'll never write like that, so I might as well hang it up right here!"--but used properly and

conscientiously by the teacher, not to browbeat the students, but to inspire and help them, literature's uses can be myriad as well as beneficial. John C. Mellon, who discusses writing's decline in American schools (1976), has an interesting thought in this regard:

> In pondering the value of writing, whether to the college-bound or the early school leaver, regardless of fancies as to its "practical" value or the current extent of its use for hire, we should always be mindful of the truth long recognized by scholars of language and thought, that writing is the greatest tool of thinking ever invented by man; that it functions as an extension of the self allowing the writer to create a reality of thought, no less real for being thought, that is unique to verbal language and dependent for its ideational plenitude upon presentation in the written medium. To have achieved a degree of mastery over the written language, to have known its production as a durable detached artifact of one's own mind, and to have felt the pleasures of crafting, focusing, and qualifying that artifact, is as valuable a learning experience as a human being can have, even if one never again puts pen to paper or earns a dime thereby" (p. 74).

Since that is a statement as apropos of the professional writer's own attitude as I can imagine, it certainly seems students could hardly help but benefit from literature's influence. I intend to use it, and use it widely, in my own classes.

Richard Altick's book, Preface to Critical Reading (1969) is written as much for teaching writing as it is teaching reading. It is perhaps one of the best textbook-type publications I have ever had the opportunity of reviewing, and his chapters are full of examples and illustrations derived from literature. Another book (not included in the bibliography, since it's just a little bit highbrow) which might be used along these same lines for honors classes (note Weingarten's comments about the variability of school grouping in freshman composition, pp. 19-28), is Brooks and Warren's Understanding Poetry (1960).

Teaching Grammar as a Part of Freshman Composition:

Grammar (the study of language structure) is not frequently used in freshman composition classes. Weingarten and Kroeger (p. 29) report that it is used about 59% of the time as a part of the total composition curriculum. Think of the converse: 41% of community/junior college teachers use no grammar whatsoever in teaching freshman composition! I think that this is a surprising find in light of the recent wave of feeling regarding "getting back to the basics." But as they also point out, many community/junior college teachers feel their courses run roughly parallel to university level courses, and there is a marked tendency for university composition courses not to offer any grammar instruction at all. There is no implicit value judgment in my comments. I much prefer a concentration on literature as an adjunct of composition instruction: I believe the best way to learn to write is to read . . . and to write. But grammar, as a description of the formal status of our language, and a discipline convergent with the study of language usage as a communicative medium, ought to be given some credit for helping students to know the rules of talking back and forth intelligibly with their fellow men. Note: traditional (structural) grammar is most frequently taught when grammar is used, transformational grammar (how sentences can be transformed into schemata of slots and voids) less often, and such things as tagmemics, almost never.

Sister Mary Clark's defense of grammar as a part of a larger language, literature, composition English curriculum, takes into account the necessity of teaching students (in her case, the younger ones)

"an appreciation and curiosity about language and its many facets" (p. 1074). William Strong uses a sort of generative or transformational type approach with sentence combining. While not strictly "teaching grammar," nor really teaching transformations, his approach is sort of grammatical in that sentence combining requires students to see words as relative parts which fit together in certain logical ways according to rules of usage and common sense (Strong, 1976).

Semantics (the study of meaning in words and language) and linguistics, not boasting very many proponents or experts among English language composition teachers, is infrequently used (Weingarten and Kroeger) in the classroom. I might add that linguistics (as a study of language histories, relationships, branches, and so forth) and semantics both can be interesting sidelights during lectures and discussions in composition classes. The histories and derivations of words, the English language compared in its peculiarities to the opposite or counterpart number in a foreign language, the unique structures and etymologies of words and phrases in English, while interesting only to the scholar as full-time pursuits, can add immeasurably to the interest in one's own language for the students in a composition class, if used sparingly and with judgment.

Some Methodologies for Teaching English Composition:

As Weingarten and Kroeger note, "The most frequently used method is a combination of lecture and discussion, 88.2% in the first semester and 87.1% in the second" (p. 38). Quite evidently, this method is preponderantly the most preferred one for teaching composition. Other methods are pure discussion, audiovisual, pure lecture, programmed learning, team teaching, and television. One school which they note under the team teaching method combined social studies with composition and humanities. I might note that Moorpark community college (Moorpark, Ventura County, California) used precisely this method during the 1969-1970 school year when I was there. Yet out of all these methods, there is much diversity.

I mentioned earlier the variety of philosophical approaches to teaching freshman composition. Concurrent with these philosophies are a number of quite different methods, most falling under the heading of combined lecture and discussion, but all quite unique in their treatment of the common subject. Kenneth J. Kantor (1975) researches historical precedents for creative expression in the school curriculum. Creativity in English, particularly in composition, is an ongoing concern for most teachers. How can students be made more "creative" or self-expressive, and at the same time more accurate and effective? How can a composition teacher mold free thinkers, and accurate, discriminating thinkers at the same time? Michael D. Platt (1975) uses the journal writing technique (which Cowley and Redman alluded to (p. 2). Platt asks his students to

keep regular records of their thoughts and ideas, which he looks at periodically, and helps the students evaluate as far as writing mechanics are concerned. Of course, no grade is ascribed to the work, which is solely for the benefit of the students' own personal development. Barbara F. Mertes (1972) uses a technique called "reader's theater," in which students acquire a sense of comfort and acclimatization with literature by staging special readings of it. I can see the applicability of this idea to composition. Janice Lower Agee mentions the vital importance of mutual cooperation and trust between teacher and students in the classroom (1975).

John V. Knapp (1976) uses a "Contract/Conference" method in his freshman composition course. His idea is to assign four essays, one of which must be completed up to a certain standard for a "D" grade, two (the second to a higher standard) for a "C" grade, three (the third up to yet a higher standard) for a "B", and four (the fourth essay being a genuinely good piece of student writing) for an "A." In addition, he holds no classroom meetings at all, but uses all of his teaching time (what would otherwise be classroom time, paper grading time, and conference time) in conferences with his students, reading their papers with them, and making on-the-spot comments. If he meets each student once a week, for an average of 15-20 minutes, he just might make the suggested 75 student maximum preferred by the N.C.T.E. (Weingarten and Kroeger, p. 8), for composition courses. Leger Brosnahan (1976) uses a somewhat similar method, but holds class meetings and uses a somewhat similar method, but holds class meetings and uses overhead projectors and transparencies to project students' themes or

parts thereof onto a screen, where the class can see them and benefit from his comments. Sara Sanders and John Littlefield (1975) discuss a method for allowing students time to ponder and research their test essay questions, and report that in so doing, students' essay test grades improved markedly over the course of a semester. In other words, students did not come into a new essay topic cold, but were allowed more time than one class period to think it over, research it, and formulate their thoughts.

Bernard J. Luskin (1975) reports on a class called "Contemporary California Issues," a huge, multi-disciplined study which includes composition and writing implicitly in its curriculum. It is a broad-based course with about 70 faculty members participating from a number of community colleges, designed to help students get a holistic, integrated outlook on society and its problems. Since writing must be about something, and writing papers could easily be a part of the requirements for passing such a course, I can see the applicability of such a course as this to a composition class, so long as English teachers were included in the staff membership, to help grade papers along with the specialists participating in their specific areas of "contemporary issues" or problems. In other words, when a student hands in an ecology paper, why not have an English teacher grade it along with a chemist or a biologist, and give the fellow credit for improving his English while he's improving his knowledge of ecology?

Obviously, freshman composition can be more than just a lecture class with student theme writing going on under the auspices of the

professor's superior knowledge. An exciting lecture, or an exciting lecturer, can be fun, but both are probably rarer than they ought to be in our educational system, so for the teacher who needs other things to help him out, there are a number of available methods and technologies, not all of which require expensive media equipment or hard-to-find bureaucratic sponsorhsip. A teacher can be innovative, interesting, and effective teaching freshman all by himself, with just a little hard work, dedication, and professional expertise.

Conclusions:

As David Siff has mentioned (1975), there are unconscious factors in students' thinking to be taken into account when treating the subject of theme writing. So are there too when treating the subject of how English teacher's perceive their own profession. What unconscious patterns go into making up the structure and subject of an essay? What unconscious preferences go into making up a teacher's syllabus, his course program, his expectations of students and of himself? Can "Educational Innovation and Teaching the Basics" coexist (Simmons, 1976)? Once confronted with the student's paper, will it be easier to ask: what went through his mind, consciously and unconsciously, when he made this up? or: what went through my mind when I made up this course program as I did, or graded this paper as I did?

The attempt here is not to be melodramatic, but to bring out for consideration some of the plethora of facets and facts surrounding the subject of teaching freshman composition. Most schools require it (or a close substitute) for graduation. Most students take it. Those are related questions. But what of the class itself? Ought we, or can we, teach literature and humanistic values along with composition? Isn't that what the discipline is for? Should we teach grammar to freshmen, or save it for the upperclass specialists in language? What method should the teacher use? How many students is optimum (see Crittenden, 1975)? Here are some (admittedly a very few) of the many, many views, suggestions, and possibilities on teaching freshman composition in the community/junior college.

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